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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1420  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1989  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC  
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000573

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SUN-FACING NIYAZOV STATUE HEADING  
INTO THE SUNSET

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (B)  
and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Many Ashgabat residents were surprised when Turkmenistan's President Berdimuhamedov directed on May 3 that the Arch of Neutrality, with its rotating gold-plated statue of former president Saparmurat Niyazov, should be moved from its current location in downtown Ashgabat to the mouth of "Neutrality Street." The original constructor of the Arch, the Turkish firm Polimeks, was also surprised -- and still is, as the government has not contacted the company about its plans. One depiction of the new arch, shown on a television newscast, showed it with a Turkmen flag flying on the top -- minus the golden Niyazov statue that turns to face the sun. Polimeks says the arch cannot be "moved," but rather would have to be destroyed and rebuilt. We see this step, to get rid of one of the most infamous and visible symbols of Niyazov's cult of personality, as part of a larger effort of de-Niyazovication, along with the phase-out of the unique month and day names Niyazov created. END SUMMARY.

NEWS CAME AS A SURPRISE

12. (SBU) One sentence buried in the middle of an article on a May 3 Cabinet of Ministers meeting in the official Russian-language government newspaper "Neytralniy Turkmenistan" announced that the Arch of Neutrality, with its rotating gold-plated statue of former president Saparmurat Niyazov, would be moved from its current location in downtown Ashgabat to the mouth of "Neutrality Street" in a southern suburb of the city. In making this announcement, the president suggested that it would be "rational" to establish this monument in the south of the city, where Turkmenistan's "Neutrality Street" begins and a modern architectural park is to be formed. The televised picture of the new Neutrality Arch showed it sporting a flag of Turkmenistan, rather than the gold statue of Niyazov.

13. (SBU) The news came as a surprise to many locals. Some learned the news from Russian television. Many doubted that the original Arch would be moved, noting that it was built to last using a tremendous amount of steel and concrete. (NOTE: Polimeks, currently the largest Turkish construction company

operating in Turkmenistan, built the Arch at a cost of \$12 million. END NOTE.) Locals interpreted the lack of elaboration on the news and in the newspaper as the government's desire to avoid focusing too much attention on this issue.

#### FURTHER SIGN OF DE-NIYAZOVICATION

14. (C) While news reports implied that the transfer of the Arch was appropriate in light of its relocation to the mouth of Neutrality Street, Ashgabat residents recognized immediately that the Arch's current location already places it squarely at one end of Neutrality Street -- and furthermore, transferring the Arch to Neutrality Street and Archabil Avenue in the southern neighborhood of Berzengi would move it from the focal point of the city, diminishing its importance. Most agreed that the decision is the most open broadside yet aimed at Niyazov's cult of personality. Supporting this interpretation is the fact that the arch currently is located just across the presidential plaza from the New Presidential Palace. The presidential office in the palace is located where the president could easily look out the window from his desk and see the statue. Many question whether Berdimuhamedov would take the same pleasure in seeing the statue as his predecessor, particularly when growing disgruntlement over the current president's economic reforms is leading citizens to compare Berdimuhamedov unfavorably with Niyazov.

POLIMEKS SAYS "MUST BE A KIND OF SECRET"

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15. (C) Caner Demir, Architect and Deputy Planning Manager at Polimeks, found out about the plans to move/remove the Arch from his wife, a diplomat at the Turkish Embassy, who read about it in the newspaper. Demir said that no one from the Government of Turkmenistan contacted Polimeks about the Arch's removal and suggested that "it must be a kind of secret." He confirmed that it is impossible to move the Arch -- if the intention is to relocate the Arch, it will have to be demolished and rebuilt from scratch. Demir thought that Polimeks might know more about plans for the removal/replacement of the Arch in a month and hypothesized that the government might intend to build a park/recreation center in the Arch's current location.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: With its faulty elevators, a non-functional restaurant and, of course, the famous golden statue that rotates so it always faces the sun, the arch stands as a monument to Niyazov's cult of personality. Berdimuhamedov has moved during his 14 months in power to "de-Niyazovify" the city and the country as well as put his own stamp on things. He has named this new epoch, Turkmenistan's "Great Revival" and it has included moving out of the isolation Niyazov imposed and reaching out to partners, especially commercial partners, in the region and beyond. He reversed Niyazov's disastrous policy on education by restoring a 10th year of education, Niyazov's "book of the soul" -- the Ruhnama -- has been de-emphasized, and many photos, paintings, and posters dedicated to the Ruhnama or Niyazov have disappeared or have been replaced by something else. The government is also phasing out the unique month and day names Niyazov created. We fully expect de-Niyazovication will continue. END COMMENT.  
CURRAN